DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 298 EC 202 497

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| AUTHOR | Helms, Rose; Blazer, Doris |
| TITLE | What about the Children? Dealing with Death. Project Enlightenment. |
| INSTITUTION | Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, N.C. |
| PUB DATE | 86 |
| NOTE | 28p.; For related documents, see EC 202 488-497. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Project Enlightenment, 501 S. Boylan Ave., Raleigh, NC 27603 ($4.00). |
| PUB TYPE | Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Childhood Attitudes; *Death; *Emotional Problems; *Emotional Response; Family Relationship; *Grief; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Funerals |

ABSTRACT

This pamphlet offers practical guidance to parents of young children who have experienced the death of a close relative or other loved one. It is intended to explain the child's emotional needs and assist the parent in planning for the child's involvement in the various stages of the death-funeral-mourning process. The text is presented as answers to a series of questions, including: (1) when and how should I tell my child about the death?; (2) how do I express my grief to my children?; (3) what can a young child understand about death?; (4) how is my child likely to respond emotionally?; (5) what kind of religious explanations should I offer?; (6) should my child be allowed to see the dead body?; (7) would my child be happier staying with a friend or relative?; (8) what if my child doesn't want to go to daycare or school?; (9) how can I help my child to say goodbye?; (10) should my child attend the funeral?; (11) how can I help my child deal with his feelings of grief?; and (12) how do I know if I should seek professional help for my child? A list of suggested readings is appended. (VW)

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# *What About The Children?*

## Dealing With Death

By Rose Helms and Doris Blazer

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# *What About The Children?*

Dealing With Death

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*Summer 1986*

Project Enlightenment
Wake County Public Schools
Raleigh, North Carolina

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# *Acknowledgments*

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to those who gave important contributions to this booklet:

Camera Graphics, black and white halftones; Glenn Godfrey Communications, typesetting; Harperprints, printing of cover; Theo. Davis Sons, printing of interior; K. D. Zotter, color transparency; Moody Graphic Color Service, color separations for cover; Michelle Stone, proofreading for design; Jane Vanderbeck, typing and clerical support.

# *In Rememberance*

This booklet is dedicated in loving memory of Matthew Lee and was made possible through the donations of his friends.

Matthew and his brothers are pictured on the cover: David, top, Matthew, center, and Rob, bottom step.

# What About The Children?

As you struggle with understanding and accepting the loss of a loved one, you will need to make many decisions that affect your children at each stage of the death-funeral-mourning process. These decisions are especially difficult because there are no readily available answers that fit every age child in every situation, and because there simply is not enough time to think through all the factors and alternatives.

This booklet is designed to offer practical guidance as you plan for your young child's involvement in the events of this intense and confusing period. Although there are no easy answers, we hope the brevity and format of the booklet will provide a framework that helps you understand your child's emotional needs. Knowing these needs simplifies your decision-making process.

In writing this material, we have drawn primarily from our counseling and consulting experiences with bereaved families. We have also incorporated research findings on the intellectual and emotional development of young children. The experiences associated with death could have a lasting impact upon the child's developing personality. Thus, our task as parents and teachers is a difficult one — to help each child deal with his sadness and bewilderment in such a way that he arrives at a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the wondrous gift of life.

## When Should I Tell My Child About The Death?

As soon as you are composed enough to talk, the children should be told of the death. Even very young children are attuned to their parents' body language, and they sense immediately that something is terribly wrong. When explanations are delayed or not given by the most trusted adult, a young child typically creates his own explanations. These ideas are often much more frightening than the reality, and they may prove difficult to dispel later.

Sometimes children will be aware of an ongoing illness but unaware that death is pending. This provides an opportunity for parents to take photographs of the child doing something with or for the patient. These pictures will help with the "I couldn't do anything" feeling after the person dies because they see evidence that "Yes, I was doing the things a child my age could do."

When death is inevitable, it helps to prepare the children by telling them as simply as possible what they can expect to happen, how they will be cared for, and where or with whom they will live. Because of their size and helplessness, children fear for their safety and well-being. When they are prepared as much as possible for unfamiliar, sometimes frightening events, they feel reassured.

## How Do I Tell My Child About The Death?

Tell your children honestly and straightforwardly, using clear wording. Young children are very literal in their thinking, so do not understand euphemisms like

*Hold your children physically close as you talk with them about the death, and provide the loving and reassuring words that let them know their family will survive the loss and grief.*

"gone to a better place" or "passed away." Saying that "We have lost Grandpa" leaves the child wondering where he can be found, or that "Aunt Sally has gone to sleep forever" makes the child fearful of sleep.

Hold your children physically close as you talk with them about the death, and provide the loving and reassuring words that let them know their family will survive the loss and grief. Allow them to share any initial feelings or questions they may have, but do not expect full understanding from them immediately. Children make sense of their experience by talking about it, so it is imperative that you listen enough to know what their questions are and then take plenty of time to respond to them.

## How Can I Deal With My Child's Pain When I Am So Sad Myself?

One of the best gifts we can give our children is to deal with our own grief. As we do so, we model for them the "okayness" of grieving and having feelings. In this process, we bring ourselves to a calmer place, and provide a more stable environment for our children. During this stressful time, give yourself permission to allow friends and neighbors to nurture your children by taking them for a walk or to the park or by simply reading them a story. The energy you have now is very limited; don't feel guilty that you have little to give.

## How Do I Express My Grief To My Children?

It is helpful for children to hear your "feeling" words because they don't yet have such a vocabulary. Tell them "I'm feeling sad (or lonely or angry) because..." State the reasons for your feelings as honestly and concretely as you can. Often children feel they are responsible for the death because of something they did or did not do. Reassure them that little children cannot cause people to die. Make it clear they will be safe in spite of the changes that have taken place and the feelings that have resulted.

## What Can A Young Child Understand About Death?

Young children typically do not grasp the finality of death because their lives have been so brief and because they have very little ability to imagine a future different from the present. Unless they have had firsthand experiences with pets dying or with other persons' death, they will not comprehend that "dead" means permanent changes.

A child at this stage of understanding will ask factual questions relating to experiences with the deceased here on earth. For example, "Does Daddy have an office in heaven?" or, "How will Mommy get anything to eat under the ground?" The child does not experience grief as an adult, who anticipates the void of life without the dead person. Instead, the young child feels the loss only when the void actually occurs. Perhaps in the winter when it begins to snow the child might say, "Daddy always makes snowmen for us when it snows. Where is my Daddy?"

## How Is My Child Likely To Respond Emotionally?

Several factors besides the child's intellectual understanding of death are likely to affect his emotional response and behavior. Most children have characteristic patterns of expressing their feelings. Some respond intensely, while others are more matter-of-fact; some need the comfort of people, while others prefer to work through their feelings alone or in high-energy activities. More aggressive children may act out their feelings, while quieter ones will often withdraw, physically into their rooms or emotionally into themselves. Generally, you can expect your child to show the same kinds of behaviors he previously displayed in coping with smaller grief experiences, such as the loss of a favorite toy, pet, teacher, or friend.

A second factor affecting the child's response is the nature of the relationship with the deceased. If the relationship was very important in the child's daily life and included many shared activities, he will experience again and again the voids resulting from that person's absence. Initially, your child may react with increased irritability, stomach pains or headaches, loss of appetite, disturbed sleeping patterns, diarrhea or constipation, and general fatigue and listlessness. You may also see increased emotional dependence, expressed in whining, clinging, searching behavior, along with a refusal to be comforted by familiar activities or toys and substitute adults.

Even when the relationship with the deceased was not an intensely personal one, the young child is likely to absorb the emotionally charged atmosphere of his home. The child's comprehension of this tension may take the form of such regressive behaviors as bed wetting, thumb sucking, or difficulty falling asleep at night. The messages conveyed by these behaviors are: "Help me. I'm lonely. I'm scared. I need you to comfort me."

## What Kind Of Religious Explanations Should I Offer?

Religious explanations are not as comforting to young children as they are to adults because they typically explain death in terms of abstract, unseen forces. The young, literal-minded child may be troubled or even frightened by a statement that "Jesus wanted Baby Brother to come live with Him in Heaven" or that it was "God's will" for a fatal illness or accident to happen to someone he loved. This is particularly true if the family has had no ongoing involvement in a religious framework and these explanations are the child's first introduction to religion.

Because beliefs differ, religious explanations will vary from family to family. Explanations are most helpful when kept honest, reassuring and within a religious framework with which the child is already familiar. Input from ministers, rabbis, or other religious leaders could be helpful if the child is already close to the person. If not, their input could be disconcerting.

## Should My Child Be Allowed To See the Dead Body?

Viewing the body is often more helpful than harmful to the child if the context is as unemotional and supportive as possible. Children should never be forced to approach or touch a body when they are fearful. However, their literalness and exposure to television leads to their creating frightening images in their minds. They may imagine a "body" (that is, without a head) or a skeleton rather than the embalmed corpse of the person they knew. Often then, children's fears are dis-

*More aggressive children may act out their feelings, while quieter ones will often withdraw, physically into their rooms or emotionally into themselves.*

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pelled by viewing the body. It is usually best for a trusted adult friend or close relative to take the children to the funeral home at a time when no one will be offended by the child's curious questions or by his possible desire to discover "what death feels like."

## Would My Child Be Happier Staying With A Friend Or Relative During This Time?

Sometimes it is helpful to a parent to have an infant or toddler cared for by a close friend who can offer emotional stability and the normal routines. An older child needs to participate in the decisions about where he should be and to decide how to maintain contact with the family at the times he chooses to be away. Sometimes regular phone calls are sufficient to provide the comfort and security the child needs. The danger is that the parent's desire to find a "happier" situation may result in the child's feeling excluded from the family. Feelings of exclusion are harder to handle than sadness because they seem so much like rejection, just at the time when the child most needs to feel a part of his family.

When the child chooses to stay at home, it is important to include him, in whatever way that is comfortable, in the rituals that make the death a reality — greeting guests at the door, accepting the cakes and covered dishes they bring, participating in the hugs and comforting words, and listening to the retelling of the events surrounding the death. Be sensitive, however, to the need to offer an alternative when the child's behavior signals too much "funeral food" or too many strangers with solemn faces and fancy clothes.

## What Should I Do If My Child Doesn't Want To Go To Daycare Or School During This Time?

The funeral period is a very sad and confusing time in the life of a family. Forcing children to go to school on the normal schedule means that they take their anxiety with them to a place where they may experience less comfort and understanding, especially from the other young children in the group. Giving them a choice between the familiar routine and alternatives allows children some degree of control in their temporarily unpredictable world. Allowing them to stay home reduces the likelihood that they will fantasize about additional tragedies occurring at home during their absences. Be sure to let the teacher know that a death has occurred so she will be aware of the situation and understand any changes in the child's behavior. This is not the time to leave your child with strangers in an unfamiliar daycare center.

## How Can I Help My Child Say Goodbye?

Because of their limited understanding of death, young children do not immediately realize the importance of "saying goodbye" to the person who has died. Parents should help the child understand that a major purpose of the funeral service is to help the surviving family members and friends bring closure to the relationship as they have known it.

In some funeral services, children may observe people at funerals offering "parting gifts" of flowers or other memorials, and they may feel hurt or guilty because they did not think of bringing a gift for their loved one.

When relevant, the child should be made aware of this custom. The parent could offer some ideas for an appropriate gift and let the child decide if he wants to give such a gift. Some children like to leave drawings or goodbye letters with the deceased. If your child decides on flowers, allow him to choose them, either at the florist or from the garden. Do not order the usual casket spray or wreath and then insist it is "from him." One child, feeling she had no flowers, chose a dandelion from her yard and tucked it into the blanket on the casket. Another child put her school picture in her grandfather's coat pocket before his casket lid was closed.

Allow your child the right to say goodbye in his own way unless this would be disruptive for remaining family members. It is also helpful if you take photographs of the child and his gift at the funeral so that later he will be able to recall that he did indeed say goodbye.

## Should My Child Attend The Funeral?

A child who has participated in the death, grief, and funeral preparation with his family should be encouraged, but not forced to attend the funeral service. Life and death are important processes, and their relationship is affirmed in the funeral service. Such a basic learning about the meaning of life should not be left to chance.

A young child may not understand intellectually all that he hears in the funeral service. He does, however, understand that this is a solemn time, that the people present are sad because of the person's death, and that he has been included and will be taken care of because he is a member of the family. As he grows older and wants to learn more about his relationship with the deceased, these memories of feeling included and

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valued will become positive "anchors" to that time and event. Such memories can be enhanced by taking pictures at the funeral, if permissible. Then, in the future the youngster can see "how big" he was and can create a visual image of what the time of the funeral was like.

An additional value of having the child attend the funeral lies in the memories of the sadness displayed by those present. As the child experiences times in his life when the absence of the deceased is especially disturbing (for example, when Dad isn't there to watch him play football or when Mother isn't there on daughter's wedding day), the memories of the sadness of the funeral will confirm the fact that it's appropriate to feel sad because of someone's death.

It is important for someone to explain to the child what to expect during the service. Older children, particularly, do not like to be caught in situations that are embarrassing because they do not know what they are expected to do. Likewise, it is valuable for the child to feel that he is, in some small way, part of the funeral service. Whenever possible, encourage the person planning the service to include the child's contribution, even something as simple as using his Bible to read from.

Because the funeral service provides a time and setting for people to express their feelings, the child's parents may be so involved in their own grief that they cannot be sensitive to their child's needs. In this case, it may be better to have someone with less body tension hold an infant or to allow an older child some choice about with whom he wants to sit at the service. One child chose to sit beside his teacher "because there was too much hurt in Mom's face."

## Does My Child Need To Wear Dress-Up Clothes?

It is more important for children to be comfortably dressed than to "look right." When a death occurs, children experience that their every movement and activity is being controlled by someone else's demands. The decision about what to wear provides some freedom of choice at a time when there seems to be none, and it is not uncommon for children's hurt to manifest itself in resistance to certain kinds of clothing.

## How Can I Help My Child Deal With His Feelings Of Grief?

Given what is known about the difficulties children have in formulating and expressing their thoughts and feelings about death, there are several things parents can do to help them through the mourning process:

1 Model for your children the "okayness" of crying. Substitute "It's okay to cry" for the more common "Big boys don't cry." Children feel more human if you share their feelings of hurt and sadness.

2 Allow your child to feel what he feels and to express what he feels, even when the emotions are unpleasant. Anger may come out toward the doctor, God, friends who still have a mother, brothers, sisters, etc. Children who can't talk about their anger often need to act it out physically.

3 Provide materials and encouragement for expressing feelings through symbolic play. Materials such as clay, crayons, magic markers, chalk and chalkboard, finger paints, collage materials, puppets, a dollhouse with family figures, and dress-up clothes may enable a child

to express emotion for which he has no words. Don't expect a picture or a "product" you can necessarily recognize, and don't be shocked if angry feelings erupt. If your child wants you to be involved in the play or in writing down a dictated story or letter to the deceased, be available to help without criticism.

4 Encourage your child to release pent-up emotional energy through active, outside play — running, swinging, biking, hammering, or other activities. See that he gets the necessary amount of rest and good nutrition since emotional stress makes a child more vulnerable to illness.

5 Maintain your customary limits about acting out aggressive feelings. A child's response to stress is learned from what adults model or permit, and hitting is not a good habit for handling stress-filled situations, either now or in the future.

6 Try, as much as possible, to be accessible and supportive at the times when your child is likely to feel lonely, angry, or tired. Be generous with words of encouragement, and convey reassurance that he is loved through eye contact when you speak to him, a back rub, holding his hand, and extra cuddling.

7 Listen to the questions your child asks about the death, especially those he repeats. The repetition may be his way of asking for reassurance of the reality of the situation, or it may be an indicator that the answer is not comforting because the child does not know how to verbalize the question he really needs to have answered. When necessary, give yourself permission to say, "I don't know."

8 Be reassuring when your child is fearful. As children experience and understand the reality of changes in their lives that result from a parent's death, they may become preoccupied with the possibility that the other parent will also die. If they are fearful of this, they tend to ask many questions about what will happen to them and where they will live and how they will get to school. Calm reassurance about the health of the surviving parent, coupled with a willingness to talk through possible life arrangements in the unlikely event of a second death, is much more helpful to the child than denial and dismissal of the child's fear.

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9 Be aware that for the first year following the death, the child may re-experience grief over the void of the dead person each time an event recurs in which that person has been central. For example, if this Thanksgiving is the first time since Grandma's death that the family will go to the house where Grandma lived, parents should talk about how it will be different. You could mention such things as the absence of her familiar brownies or the fact that she will not be standing at the door waving goodbye when the family leaves.

10 Provide children with an awareness that the birth-growth-death cycle occurs in many forms throughout nature. Experiences with plants and animals enable children to process the universality of life and death.

## How Do I Know If I Should Seek Professional Help For My Child?

Parents should not be surprised by fluctuations in their young child's behavior and emotional responses throughout the days of the funeral and the first few weeks of the mourning period. Generally, parental support and a return to more relaxed, consistent family routines will produce positive changes in the child's behavior. The emergence or persistence of any of the following behavior patterns may indicate a need for professional consultation:

1 The child's bodily functions (eating, sleeping, toileting, etc.) continue to be erratic and sources of stress.

2 The child withdraws from others, "distancing" as if to protect himself from those he had formerly loved most. This is evident, for example, in a child's wanting to spend long periods of time alone in his room.

3 The child maintains his hurt, anger, or pain over an extended period.

4 The child shows a declining interest in play, being with his friends in the neighborhood or in social groups, or in returning to his familiar school or daycare center.

5 The child is preoccupied with certain actions or questions, or with repeatedly replaying events of the death or funeral.

Occasionally a young child will express the wish to die, which usually represents a desire to be with the deceased. If, however, this wish is expressed by a child showing any of the above behaviors, it should be taken seriously.

## Where Can I Go For Help?

Many larger communities have resources available to help parents cope with the grief and stress that accompany the death of a family member. Good places to start are:

1 Agency-sponsored bereavement groups, such as "Compassionate Friends" or "Candlelighters."

2 Your local public library, which has some excellent books about death and grief for both children and adults.

3 Professionals who have had experience working with young children concerning death and loss. (Try your local mental health clinic, family service agency, or a private practitioner, such as psychologist, child psychiatrist, social worker, or marriage and family therapist.) Your pediatrician may be able to recommend a counselor with experience in dealing with children, death, and grief.

4 College or university departments of Child Development, Psychology, Pediatrics, Nursing, Social Work, or Early Childhood Education.

5 Ministers and rabbis, especially those who have Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) backgrounds or church-sponsored counseling centers.

6 Social agencies for children. (In Wake County, counseling services of Project Enlightenment are available to families with children 0-6. Families may also use the Project's Parent-Teacher Resource Center to check out books to be read to small children.)

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## Suggested Reading


Brown, Margaret W.
*The Dead Bird*

Buscaglia, Leo
*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*

De-Paola, Tomie
*Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*

Fassler, Joan
*My Grandpa Died Today*

Harris, Audrey
*Why Did He Die* (grandfather)

Hinton, John
*Dying*

Hogan, Bernice
*My Grandmother Died, But I Won't Forget Her*

Hoopes, Lyn Littlefield
*Nana*

Kubler-Ross, E.
*Remember the Secret* (friend)

Miles, Miska
*Annie and The Old One* (grandmother)

Simon, Norma
*We Remember Philip* (children)

Stein, Sara Bonneth
*About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together*

Stevens, Carla
*Stories from a Snowy Meadow* (friend)

*This booklet is one of a continuing series of booklets of interest to parents and teachers of young children. Please write Project Enlightenment for a list of topics in this series or for information about other Project publications.*

Project Enlightenment, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a comprehensive mental health/educational program serving young children (birth to age six), their parents, teachers, and other child care givers. Administered through the Wake County Public School System and affiliated with Area Mental Health for Wake County, the Project has received local, state, and national recognition for its innovative approaches to prevention and early intervention, its effective service delivery system, and its positive influence in the community. Selected as a state model for early intervention, Project Enlightenment has also been selected as one of seven national models of preschool mental health programs by the Joint Information Service of the National Association for Mental Health.

Major services of Project Enlightenment include consultation to day care and preschool teachers, parent education, family counseling, teacher training, a demonstration preschool, community consultation and education, services to high risk infants, a TALKline telephone consultation service, and a Parent-Teacher Resource Center. In existence since 1969, the Project includes a multi-disciplinary staff of early childhood educators, parent education workers, and psychologists. Interested persons are invited to visit or write for additional information: Project Enlightenment, 501 South Boylan Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27603.